

SUMMER WORK

Keeping Game and Fish Lands Ready for Public

By Doug Leier



The list of things – be it at boat ramps or farther inland – to get done to make life more convenient for outdoor enthusiasts in North Dakota is long.



For most, the road traveled matters little once we've arrived at our destination.

Seldom do we realize or appreciate, while backing a boat down a ramp or beginning a pheasant hunt across the prairie, the time and energy to provide access to fishing holes and hunting spots. Little evidence of the hours spent rebuilding a boat ramp, correcting a boundary fence or placing new signs near a tucked-in-the-woods wildlife management area is present, save for a few tire tracks or matted down grass.

Visiting wildlife management areas, Private Land Open To Sportsmen or other North Dakota Game and Fish Department managed lands depends on proper signs to assure your location matches your destination. Imagine if you traveled to Minneapolis for the weekend and none of the motels had signs or directions to guide you.

A visit to a WMA or lake is no different. Without proper maps and signage, time would be wasted searching for your location and double checking to make sure you are where you think you are.

Realize this: Miles of fence, thousand of signs and dozens of boat ramps take time and energy, much of it supplied by Game and Fish seasonal employees, to ready things for your arrival.

Maintenance

Maintaining fences, signs and parking areas is a small, but essential part of land management. Picture a Game and Fish WMA without a sign. Without signs, how would a visitor know the acreage is open to hunting and not privately owned? Fences define boundaries in areas without signs, signaling the user to reassess his or her location before crossing over. Maintaining nearly 190,000 acres on 175 WMAs in North Dakota is no easy task. Factor in the nearly 800,000 PLOTS acres that are marked with walk-in access signs, and the chore is even bigger.

Just visiting all the locations – found in all corners of the state and places in between – is a challenge. Travel, even from the Game and Fish Department's six field offices, can be several hours one way. "It's a unique and enjoyable challenge," said Scott Peterson, Department lands/development section supervisor, Lonetree. "We maintain several hundred miles of fence each year.

We'll replace old fence and construct about 15 miles of new fence each year. The landscape we're working on can be just about anything." From rugged hills and outcroppings in the Killdeer Mountains to aspen forests in the Turtle Mountains to lowland timber along the Missouri River.

At times, just transporting equipment into a work site means hauling fencing tools and supplies miles across rugged terrain during the heat of the day. Then the work of pounding fence posts for hours begins, made even more challenging thanks to mosquitoes, ticks, undocumented sink holes, rattlesnakes and other nuisances.

And it's not just fencing and posting boundary signs, Peterson adds: "As with any landowner in North Dakota, weed control is a big part of land management. Our budget includes about \$250,000 on noxious weed control. That's what it takes to certify our employees as pesticide applicators and treat almost 12,000 acres of weeds each year. Factor in biological control of leafy spurge with beetles, some mowing of weeds, and it's a big part of the equation."

Differing regions and specific habitat goals require an array of land management practices. "Controlled burns are needed to generate specific responses from preferred grass

Public Use is Unheralded Task

species, and in any given year we'll conduct burns on about 2,000 to 3,000 acres," Peterson said. "In some field offices such as Devils Lake and Williston, we're dependent upon certified seasonal staff to help us conduct prescribed burns. The seasonal workers are invaluable; we couldn't do it without them."

Seasonal workers work side-by-side with their full-time counterparts and supervisors, all with the common goal of providing quality outdoor opportunities.

Helping Hands

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department, with about 150 full-time employees, is one of the smaller agencies of its kind in the nation. Fifty or more seasonal workers – from students working toward degrees in fisheries or wildlife management to teachers seeking summer employment – lend a hand in the Department's effort.

Seasonal employment, for those aspiring to attain a career in the natural resource field, provides a couple of things. First, it's a valuable field experience – valuable because the job market is competitive and on-the-ground job experience often separates a candidate from other hopefuls. Second, it offers the employee an opportunity to network, and get a taste of the actual career. Some may reaffirm their desire, while others may choose a different career path.

Seasonal workers, while working in remote areas and sometimes under tough conditions, are afforded a firsthand look at some of the most fascinating terrain North Dakota has to offer. From what little remains of the tallgrass prairie in the Shewen Grasslands to hidden treasures of tucked away fishing ponds, seasonal workers spend the majority of their time where many of their full-time counterparts would rather be – outdoors.

The seasonal worker will experience his or her share of post pounding, removing and replacing fencing, repairing signs and picking up trash. But there's more to it than that. There are times they're front row in goose banding operations, or helping to track movements of bighorn sheep in the badlands.

Fishing and boating access

It's not just land and wildlife managers working to maintain and improve your out-

door experiences. Maintaining access to North Dakota's nearly 300 managed fishing waters is a year-round task.

The Missouri River System, with Lake Sakakawea and Oahe water levels at record lows, literally has fisheries development personnel chasing receding waters to maintain and provide access for anglers and recreational boaters. Meanwhile at Devils Lake, the scenario is too much water, but the challenge is equally daunting.

While North Dakota anglers spend nearly two of every three fishing hours on Lake Sakakawea or Devils Lake, the importance of providing fishing and boating access on other waters is not lost on Department personnel. Community fisheries, those waters near home, are just as important. For instance, boating and fishing access on the Red River has been improved dramatically over the past decade, with new and improved boat ramps from Wahpeton to Fargo to Grand Forks. The Red will never see, nor is it capable of absorbing the fishing pressure of Devils Lake or Sakakawea. Even so, providing access, which can be a challenge as water levels can jump quickly during heavy rains, is important as the river winds close to about one-third of North Dakota's people.

Other community fisheries such as Carbury Dam, Bottineau County, Patterson Lake near Dickinson and Lake Hoskins, McIntosh County, all find Department personnel working with local groups to maintain and provide adequate boating and fishing facilities. Existing ramps require yearly maintenance, buckled steel or cement shifts must be corrected to ensure safe access, but limited staff and funding require coordination with wildlife clubs, city or county park boards, and others.

In some instances, a change in water levels may limit access at an existing site, or a "new" pond producing a perch fishing frenzy needs new access. In each case, administrators seek available land for boating and fishing access and work through the legal process of securing easements and dedicated access. Workers on the ground physically develop the access site. It's a process seldom seen firsthand, but appreciated when a boat is able to enter the water or a cast is made from shore.

Wrapping it up

Maintenance of Game and Fish Department land and fishing access sites is sometimes taken for granted, just like the many seasonal employees carrying out the tasks. Much WMA maintenance takes place during summer outside of hunting seasons, and visitors don't often notice subtle changes or improvements made between stops. Evidence from a spring prescribed burn is usually hard to find come fall, and missing or damaged signs have already been replaced.

The same holds true for your favorite fishing hole. A boat ramp buckled at ice out and replaced by mid-May will appear to have always been "a good place to put a boat in" by locals frequently using the ramp.

As summer wears on and merges into fall, and you visit a new fishing hole or other favorite retreat, take a moment to appreciate the sweat and time to help put your boat on the water, or wild game in the bag.

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